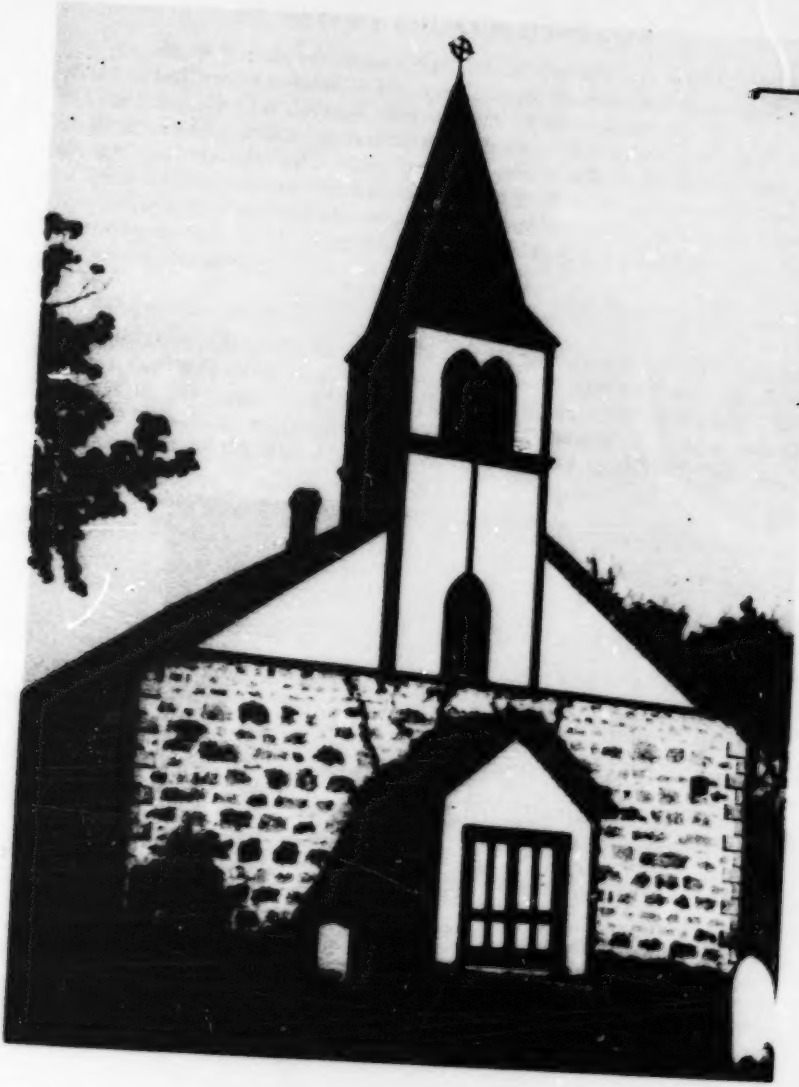


ST. PETER'S CHURCH DYNEVOR

DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL
AFFAIRS AND HISTORICAL RESOURCES

Historic Resources Branch

Honourable Eugene Kostyra
Minister

1983

ST. PETER'S CHURCH DYNEVOR

As one of the oldest stone churches on the prairies, and as the site of the oldest Indian mission in western Canada, St. Peter's Church Dynevor has had a long and distinguished history. Constructed in 1837 in the heart of the first Indian agricultural settlement in the West, the original church was replaced by a stone structure which still stands at the mouth of Cook's Creek, some five kilometres north of East Selkirk, Manitoba. The driving force behind the establishment of the Indian settlement and the construction of St. Peter's Church was the Anglican missionary, the Reverend William Cockran.

An Indian Settlement

William Cockran came to the Red River Settlement with his wife on 14 October 1825 to serve as an assistant to the Reverend David Jones at the Middle (St. Paul's) and Upper (St. John's) churches. Between 1826 and 1827 Cockran made plans for the establishment of a new church further north on the Red River. In 1827 he moved to the site, and on 1

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Reverend William Cockran

May 1832 opened St. Andrew's "the Lower Church." Some eighteen kilometres further down river was Netley Creek, the customary gathering place for a number of Swampy Cree and Saulteaux bands. Over the next few years, Cockran's life was to become intimately connected with those of the nearby Indian people.

The gradual expansion of agricultural settlement had had a disastrous effect on the Netley Creek bands. The natural habitats of the game they hunted for food had been destroyed to make way for farming. As a result, the Indians had become increasingly dependent on the handouts they received at the Red River Settlement. It was clear that these bands needed assistance, but it was not clear what form that assistance would take until Cockran arrived at the Lower Church.

Intent upon satisfying what he believed to be the material and spiritual needs of these people, Cockran encouraged the Indians to take up agriculture. It was his belief that a settled existence and Christianity went hand in hand. While the Indians tended to their crops, he would tend to their souls by providing religious instruction on a regular basis. His task was not a simple one. The switch to an agricultural way of life, like conversion to Christianity did not come easily or quickly to these proud nomadic people.

At first the Indians could see little or no advantage to the business of farming. Floods, droughts and grasshopper plaques were commonplace, and offered little incentive to a people who for centuries had relied on hunting and gathering. Moreover, the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), whose interest lay in the fur trade, had little desire to encourage an endeavour that would turn the Indians away from trapping and hunting. In October 1831, however, HBC Governor George Simpson gave reluctant consent to Cockran's plans for an experimental farm. By 1832, Chief Peguis, leader of the Saulteaux, and a few other Indian families agreed to participate in the experiment.

Peguis was sixty years old at the time and had just endured a severe winter in which many of his people had come close to starvation. These conditions, combined with Cockran's reassurances that farming would bring his people comfort and prosperity, led Peguis to support the missionary's project. In 1832, the first attempt at an Indian agricultural settlement was made at Sugar Point above the town of Selkirk. The site was chosen because of the Indians' attachment to the area, but the land proved to be too low and swampy. After the limited returns of the first year, the settlement moved five to six kilometres down river to a spot near Cook's Creek.

In this new location the seven original farmers were joined by another seven and, in subsequent years, the settlement steadily grew. In 1834 a log school house was constructed. The six by twelve metre building also functioned as a teacher's residence and had a loft that doubled as a granary. Joseph Cook, son of Chief Factor William Cook of York Factory, became the settlement's first teacher. When the school opened for the first time on 11 July the new instructor found thirty-two children attending.

Log houses were also built on small river lots and a number of cattle

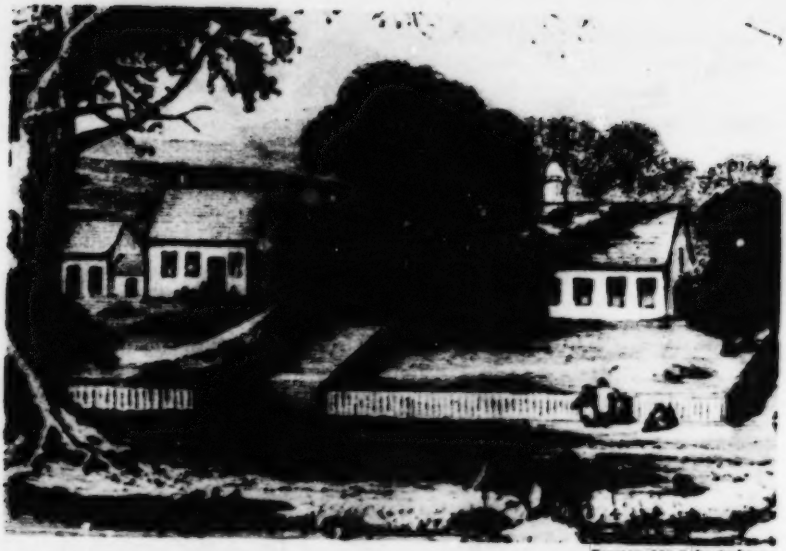
Courtesy Manitoba Archives

A water colour painting by artist, Peter Rindisbacher, possibly Chief Peguis, c. 1820s

were acquired. A windmill, built in 1835, proved to be an important source of motivation because it allowed the native farmers to see the fruits of their labour being ground into flour. Encouraged by these advances, Cockran decided that it was time for a church to be built.

Work began on the first church at the settlement in 1836, and it was officially opened on 4 January 1837. The church was a simple building, approximately sixteen by seven metres and capable of holding 300 people. During a visit in 1844, Bishop Mountain described the structure as "a wooden building, painted white . . . with a cupola over the entrance and square-topped windows."

By 1838, the population of the Indian settlement had grown to 239. The number involved in farming was much smaller as only some two



Courtesy Manitoba Archives

A drawing of the Indian settlement, 1846, from *Manitoba Milestones*, note the cupola or round tower on the building which is probably the original church.

hectares were under cultivation that year. Two years later, thirty-five hectares were planted, and by 1849 the 460 native settlers had ninety-three hectares under cultivation. Despite these later successes, however, the early years were difficult ones.

Cockran found the struggle for Christian converts and the transition to agriculture to be a long slow process. Many of the Indians were reluctant to relinquish their traditional beliefs and practices. Once the native farmers harvested their crops they frequently followed tradition and gave away the extra to their less fortunate brothers, rather than storing it for the winter. When supplies were scarce they relied on Cockran. The minister frequently fed the children at the school and, on more than one occasion, sent food to their families to insure that the children would continue to attend classes.

Once the Reverend Jones left for England in 1838, Cockran's responsibilities increased. He commuted from St. Andrew's to the Indian settlement and began to find the long hours of work a tremendous strain. In a moving appeal to the Church Missionary Society, Chief Peguis requested that another clergyman be sent to help Cockran. He pointed out how difficult it had been for his people to accept Christianity. This new religion had forced them "to leave off getting drunk, to leave off adultery, to keep only one wife and to cast away our rattles, drums and our gods . . . ." With the Reverend Jones gone and Cockran threatening to leave, Peguis warned that his people might turn back to their old

ways. The 300 souls of his people were at stake, and he argued that surely they were "worthy of one praying master."

In September 1839 his petition was answered. The Reverend John Smithurst arrived in Red River to take over William Cockran's work at the Indian settlement. Cockran was relieved of his duties and moved to St. Cross House at the Upper Church where he eventually recuperated.

Smithurst was an experienced farmer and the settlement thrived under his guidance. The evangelization of the Indians also proceeded rapidly. In his report of 1842 Smithurst noted that the Sunday morning service drew a congregation of 250, when the prayers were given in the Indian language. The Sunday School had 184 young scholars, and a large group attended evening lectures from Monday to Friday. When Bishop George Jehosaphet Mountain came west from Montreal in 1844, Smithurst presented him with 204 candidates for confirmation.

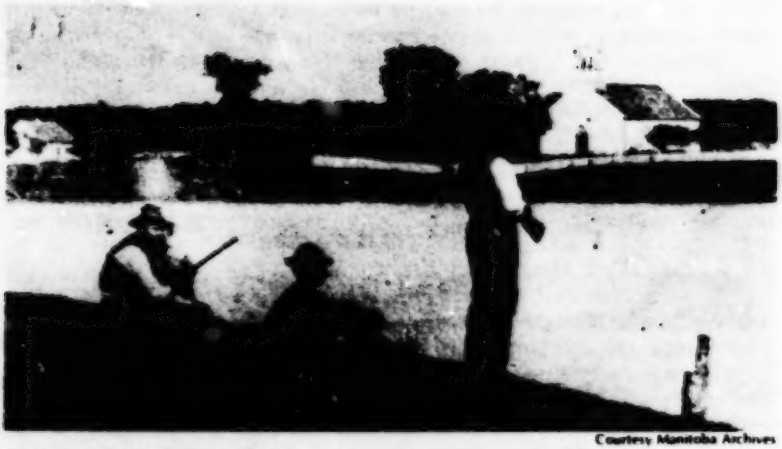
In time this strenuous work also took its toll on Smithurst. Although the settlement continued to grow, many of its members preserved their loyalty to their traditional way of life and tended to drift away. Smithurst's original enthusiasm diminished, and in the summer of 1851 he returned to England.

By this time Cockran had regained his strength and was eager to take up his work with the Indians again. With Smithurst's departure, he returned, this time to live at the settlement instead of commuting from St. Andrew's. When he arrived he found the church of 1836 worn with age and too small to accommodate a population that was now close to 500. One of Cockran's first actions was to propose to the Church Missionary Society (CMS) that a new stone structure be built.

The CMS granted his request and money was raised through subscriptions and through a donation made by Bishop Anderson of the Diocese of Rupert's Land. Cockran designed the building and supervised its construction. Eighty cords of stone were quarried some thirteen kilometres away at Garson in the fall of 1852, and the stone masons were kept busy all winter dressing stone for the corners, windows and doors. In May a foundation twenty-one metres by twelve metres with walls over one metre deep and one metre thick was laid. On 23 May 1853 Bishop Anderson placed the cornerstone and assigned the name "St. Peter" to the church.

To complete work on the structure before winter arrived, Cockran and the Indian labourers worked long hours, often from five o'clock in the morning until seven in the evening. The stone walls were erected using a block and tackle, and mortar was made by burning lime in a kiln. Glass for the windows was shipped from Britain in molasses kegs and could only be removed once the sticky substance was heated. By the end of July, work almost ground to a halt because of a lack of funds, provisions and skilled stone masons. Fortunately, a CMS advance arrived, and the work continued. The church was roofed by the time winter came and was finished for use by the following year.

Because of the debts incurred during construction, the church was not consecrated until 18 June 1886, but it was dedicated and opened for services in 1854. In many respects, the finished product resembled



Courtesy Manitoba Archives

A view of St. Peter's from a vantage point across the river, note the open-sided tower over the front entrance.

the early nineteenth century parish churches of England, William Cockran's homeland. Close to three decades in the North-West led Cockran to make a few variations on the basic design. Like the English churches, St. Peter's had a small, square, box-like base, but it featured a more steeply pitched roof that helped to compensate for snow build-up. Moreover, the original stone tower, which was removed in 1880 because of deterioration, was open-sided to lessen the buffeting by high winds.

Although smaller in size and simpler in design than St. Andrew's and other churches further up the Red River, St. Peter's was a solid building with some fine features. The corner stones and window surrounds, for example, were precisely cut and surpassed the quality of work done on the larger churches farther south. Consequently, whatever St. Peter's may have lacked in terms of quantity or size, was made-up for in the quality of its workmanship.

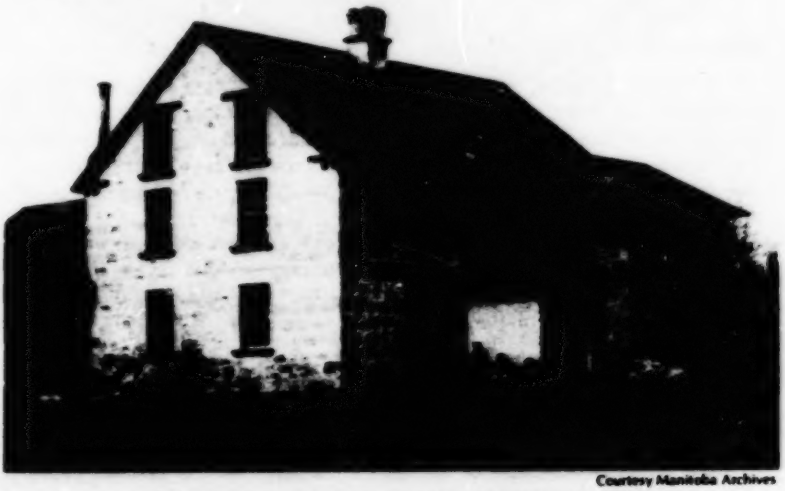
In 1857, when Cockran left the Indian settlement and moved to St. Mary's Church at Portage la Prairie, St. Peter's was well-established. Within a short time after Cockran's departure, however, changes began to occur. The Reverend Abraham Cowley, Cockran's assistant at the Indian settlement, was placed in charge of the church and mission. After Chief Peguis' death in 1865, tensions between the Saulteaux and Cree and between Christian and non-Christian Indians grew and caused divisions at the settlement. Moreover, Canadian settlers who came out to Red River in the 1860s and 1870s in search of rich farmland often bought out the Indian farmers. As the white and Métis presence increased in the area, the native population dispersed. In time, what was once called the "Indian settlement" came to be known as the Parish of St. Peter's.

In 1871 an Indian treaty designated St. Peter's as a reserve, but this did not halt the sale of land or prolong the life of the settlement.

By 1875 half of the population in the area were non-treaty Indians and eventually, much of the missionaries' painstaking work was undone. Farming became a subsidiary occupation for the remaining natives who readily re-adapted to hunting and fishing. In 1908 St. Peter's was closed as a reserve. A number of Indians who still held land in the area sold out and moved north to the newly-opened Peguis Reserve. The old river lots merged into larger farms and the overall population of St. Peter's parish decreased.

Despite the changes and upheavals that occured in the area from the 1860s until the early 1900s, the clergy of St. Peter's remained active at the settlement. They continued to support the Indians' cause and to minister to the needs of the parish. In March 1896, for example, an Indian hospital was opened by the parish minister, Reverend J.G. Anderson. The facility was located in a house that had been built for Archdeacon Cowley in 1865, and which he had bequeathed to the church for use as a hospital in 1887. The house was named Dynevor by Cowley after the title given to his childhood friend and spiritual mentor, Canon Rice of Fairford, England. The Dynevor Indian Hospital became the cornerstone of the church's work in the district. By 1876 the name Dynevor was also applied to the area's post office and eventually, the name became associated with the parish itself.

Additions were also made to the church over the years. The stone wall at the south end of the graveyard was dismantled and used to construct a chancel and vestry approximately eight by five metres. Thus St. Peter's became the first of the early Red River churches to have a proper chancel. Another bell tower was constructed in 1904 to replace the one



Courtesy Manitoba Archives

The Dynevor Indian Hospital and patients, 1920

dismantled in 1880 and to commemorate St. Peter's jubilee. The tower was later topped with a spire. Two bells hung inside its walls until 1962. The larger bell was cast in London's famous Whitechapel Foundry in 1850. It weighed over sixty-four kilograms and was a gift from the Church Missionary Society. The smaller bell had been given to the Reverend Cowley by an English friend in 1857. Tuned to G sharp, this bell was said to have the finest tone of all the church bells along the Red River.

In 1941 the Dynevor Indian Hospital was sold to the federal government to be used as a tuberculosis hospital for treaty Indians and Eskimos. It was later repossessed by the Anglican Church and given to the St. John's Cathedral Boys' School. At the same time a new, smaller St. Peter's Church was built on the west side of the river where the majority of the parish people lived.

St. Peter's Dynevor now stands isolated on the lonely east bank of the Red. The cemetery which surrounds the walls of this historic church contains the graves of some 3,000 Indians who were killed by epidemics that swept through the settlement. Unfortunately, prairie grass fires destroyed almost all of the original wooden crosses that marked the graves.

Restoration work was done on the original church and it is now used by the congregation during the summer months. The hand-hewn pews and carved pulpit built during the days of the missionary settlement have been preserved. The church itself stands as a reminder of the dedicated work of the Anglican clergy, the Church Missionary Society and the first Indian farmers of the settlement who embraced the Christian faith. As one of Manitoba's oldest churches, and as the focal point of the first Indian agricultural settlement in western Canada, St. Peter's remains an important historic site in the province of Manitoba.

Suggestions for Further Reading

A more detailed study of St. Peter's reserve and parish is Michael Czuboka's, *St. Peter's: A Historical Study with Anthropological Observations on the Christian Aborigines of Red River* (M.A. Thesis, University of Manitoba, 1960). The papers of William Cockran and John Smithurst in the *Church Missionary Society Papers* provide insight into the settlement's early years.

For a general history of the Anglican Church in western Canada, see Thomas C.B. Boon's, *The Anglican Church from the Bay to the Rockies* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1962). The reader may also want to consult two other pamphlets published by the Historic Resources Branch entitled, *Chief Peguis* and *St. Paul's Middlechurch*.

Credits

The cover photograph of St. Peter's Church, 1941, is printed courtesy of the Manitoba Archives.

ST. PETER'S
This church was built in 1853 under the personal direction of Archdeacon William Cockran. The foundation stone was laid May 23 by Bishop David Anderson, who gave the church its name. It replaced an earlier one built in 1836 a little to the south of the new site. It served the Indian settlement of the same name established here in 1834, the first attempt at an Indian agricultural community in Western Canada.
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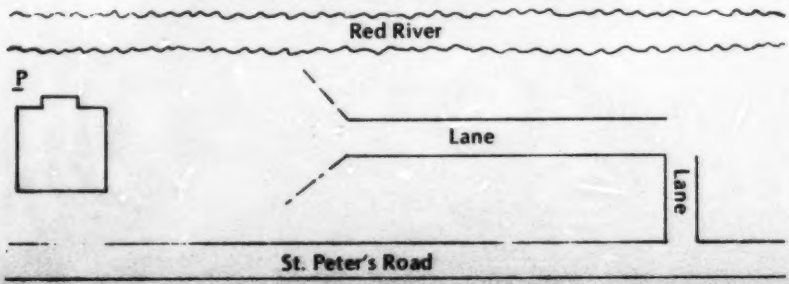
This plaque is located in front of St. Peter's Church, just off St. Peter's Road north of East Selkirk.



OUR HERITAGE

We have received great gifts as our heritage in Canada — beautiful rivers and parks, rolling hills, trees and grassland; the rich resources of nature are ours to protect, cherish and enjoy.

Wherever man has been, there are marks of defilement and destruction — let us resolve that this shall not be our legacy to the twenty-first century. Let us rather honour and emulate those who went before us as pioneers, who gave of themselves, building and creating, enriching the land. They have earned our thanks, and while we cannot repay them, we can respect their achievements and resolve that we will try to follow them in action and in attitude.

For this we set aside this special place in our Province, a site that is part of history.

POOR

QUALITY

ORIGINAL